

id21 email discussion

Communicating international development research

Community radio for development

id21 email discussion report

23 January – 17 February 2006

Poor and disadvantaged people are turning to community radio as a way of getting involved in decision-making processes and voicing their concerns. Despite the growing 'digital divide', radio provides access to information and knowledge for millions of people who would otherwise be excluded.

id21's email discussion, Community Radio for Development, was an opportunity for community media practitioners and activists from around the world to share their experiences and views on the role of community radio in development processes.

Over 450 people subscribed to the discussion and 118 people with experience in over 40 countries contributed their views. Discussions focused on the issues covered in id21 insights #58: 'Voices for change: tuning in to community radio', online at www.id21.org/insights/insights58/index.html.

Each week focused on a different topic led by a different moderator:

- 1 **An enabling environment, Steve Buckley, World Association of Community Broadcasters**
- 2 **Achieving sustainability, Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, Communication for Social Change**
- 3 **Assessing the social impact of community radio, Birgitte Jallo, Independent Consultant**
- 4 **The fourth week was left open for participants to raise any outstanding issues**

This report summarises the discussion (fuller summaries available at: www.id21.org/communityradio/summaries.html) and highlights key recommendations put forward by participants for developing the community radio agenda. The report is also available online at: www.id21.org/communityradio/finalreport.pdf.



Radio Trinidad is named after the Trinidad quarter in Asunción, Paraguay. A favourite programme is 'Open Studio' when the radio goes out into the community. Here you see an 'Open Studio' questioning the invasion of Iraq. The radio transmitted from the square in front of the American Embassy for several weeks before being removed by the police.



Personal contact remains a characteristic of Radio Sucumbios in Nueva Loja, Ecuador. The radio pays weekly visits to communities for the Programme 'La Vida de los Pueblos' (Community Life).



Radio Pio XII, SigloXX in Llallagua, Bolivia is one of the leading popular radios in Latin America. Founded in 1959 it has continuously played an important role in putting democracy and justice first, with miners and peasant populations. Here children participate in a local festival organised by the radio station.

Photos from: 'La Práctica Inspira: La Radio Popular y Comunitaria frente al nuevo siglo' ALER-AMARC-AL, Quito, Ecuador, 2004

Discussion summary

Week 1:

An enabling environment

www.id21.org/communityradio/summary1.html

- A good enabling environment for community radio to flourish is enhanced when basics such as respect for the right to freedom of expression, access to information, good governance, transparency and respect for the rule of law are in place.
- Good legislation and regulation, put into practice, is essential. Recognition that community radio has a place within radio broadcasting – separate from public and private – is also important.
- Studies by participatory communication researchers comparing good and bad practices internationally would help achieve a better understanding of the enabling environment. Mapping the environments of different countries and identifying what factors favour the emergence of community radio would also help.
- Persuading governments to allow the existence of community radio is not easy. Wider political change, strong expressions of demand from local people and effective campaigning by community media advocates and their allies all have a role to play.

Week 2:

Achieving sustainability

www.id21.org/communityradio/summary2.html

- Unless aspects of social, institutional and financial sustainability are considered equally, long-term sustainable communication processes are unlikely.
- Participation and ownership by communities is essential to sustainability. Community radio stations have to be community-based initiatives where decision-making is made by community members.
- Many initiatives are already in progress, in spite of inappropriate, inadequate or non-existent legislation. Community-based groups may have to fight for legislation and work together at national and international levels.
- Lack of infrastructure is not necessarily prohibitive: despite lack of electricity, internet access and telephones in Latin America, thousands of community radio stations have developed there since the 1950s.
- Technical assistance, equipment, training, or money provided by donors from outside the community cannot be permanent or sustainability will be just an illusion. Real sustainability happens when a community progresses by making its own decisions.

Week 3:

Assessing impact

www.id21.org/communityradio/summary3.html

- Impact assessments are important for measuring:
 - how a community radio station functions internally as an organisation
 - how far radio meets the needs and desires of the community
 - how far community radio is responsible for positive development within the community.
- Impact assessments also help convince governments, funding agencies, and potential advertisers and advocates of community radio's viability.
- Positive assessments can improve staff morale; regular assessments will help the station respond to listeners' preferences and improve programming.
- Decisions about the methods chosen for carrying out assessments, whether external expert or community and participant-led, or a combination of the two has implications for validity, reliability, community empowerment, feedback mechanisms and so on.

Key themes

The discussion identified several aspects to consider when attempting to strengthen community radio's role in development.

■ Getting the setting right

Different scenarios can help community radio emerge. Activists can take advantage of democratisation processes and governments' loosened control over the means of communication:

- In South Africa, community media was born out of the struggle for national liberation and blossomed with the end of Apartheid in 1994.
- In Ghana, the 1992 constitution paved the way for the deregulation of broadcasting and the recognition of community radio as a distinct part of broadcasting, separate from public and private broadcasting.
- Good governance, freedom of expression, access to information and respect for the rule of law will help but not necessarily cause community radio to emerge.



Radio Peace in Ghana has a regular programme on 'Community Participation in Local Governance'. Here, a focus group comprising the Assembly Member and Unit Committee Members in a community in the Asikuma-Odoben-Brakwa district in Ghana's Central Region use ranking and scoring methods to determine priorities, an activity facilitated by Radio Peace volunteer staff (standing).
Credit: Radio Peace

■ Appropriate legislation needed

Permissive regulation is also essential, although legal recognition of community radio stations is only the first step:

- The law also needs to ensure that stations are independent, improve the environment in which they operate and promote citizen engagement.
- Community radio stations are different from private stations: they need to be charged appropriate and affordable licensing fees and ensured suitable bandwidth and transmitter power allowances.
- In Brazil, community radio is legally recognised but the law stipulates a maximum coverage radius of one kilometre and a 25 watt transmitter, which, given the vast areas that need covering, does not make sense (stations with more powerful transmitters are considered illegal and often harassed by the police).

■ Community-led radio works best

Community radio can exist even in unsupportive environments. The Bolivian miners' radio stations in the 1950s were repressed by successive military regimes but managed to survive with strong community support. Other community radio stations in Latin America operated and survived, although illegal. In India, stations have started to operate while waiting for legislation to catch up with the reality of community radio.

Community support and participation can make up for lack of funding, as community members give up their time and money to maintain the station. The best-funded and staffed stations will be of no practical use if people do not support the vision. Community support provides a secure base that sustains a station in the long run, as members develop a vested interest in its success.

Activists need to work with other stakeholders, including government ministries (communication and information, for example), other broadcasters, including the private sector, each other and international supporters, human rights groups and other development organisations. Collaboration can result in drafting broadcast legislation, as femLINKPACIFIC helped to do in the Fiji Islands. Experience from Latin America, however, shows that opposition can come from powerful private broadcasters and commercial networks trying to secure their share of the market.

International NGOs, United Nations agencies and the World Bank are currently seeking to support appropriate information and communication technologies for community development, including radio. Such support can be valuable but care is needed not to become too dependent on external assistance in case criticism is suppressed (perhaps even by the government if it is the station's main benefactor). International support may also be a hindrance if interaction between the agency and the government leads to compromise.

■ Commitment is crucial

Whilst technically trained staff are important, it is even more important to engage individuals committed to the vision of community radio and processes of social change. Discussion participants noted that it is easier to develop professional capacity than motivation and commitment. Existing volunteers need to be able to involve a new generation of volunteers, just as passionate about community radio, to take over the station in the future and continue facilitating social and participatory processes.

■ Is community radio making a difference?

Impact assessments will determine whether the following (and other) questions are being answered:

- Can positive changes in the community be traced back to the station?
 - How far are radio programmes meeting the needs and desires of the community?
- Continual feedback can help improve programming and allow changes to suit the needs of listeners. Evaluation is also useful for convincing funding agencies, government and potential supporters of the value of community radio.

In addition to systematic reviews, informal, on-going assessment, by advisory committees, listeners' clubs, talk-back programmes, questionnaires, asking callers' in questions and so on, can also be invaluable. Should radio stations pay listeners' clubs for providing feedback? If so, how far can their input be trusted? Should external, 'expert' (and expensive) evaluators be used? Their findings might be seen as more credible for funding purposes but an internal, community-owned evaluation process would be more empowering. Some discussants were sceptical about local staff ability to collect and present data reliably, while others felt that even if evaluations involved external assessors, the process should be decided in collaboration with community media owners with a view to passing on techniques, tools and knowledge to local volunteers.

Participants shared and debated a range of other assessment methodologies – a summary can be found at www.id21.org/communityradio/summary3.html.

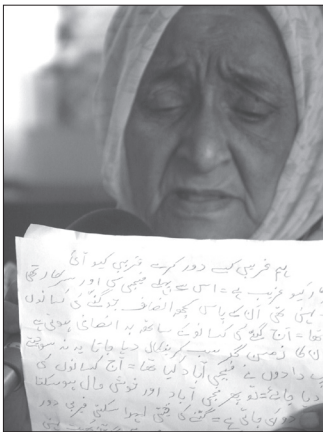
■ Don't leave women behind!

In the final week, participants discussed the fact that gender is a key differentiating factor with regard to access to information. Community radio needs to overcome this. Women do not have as much time to listen to the radio as men; nor do they necessarily have control over the use of the radio set. Decisions about what gets aired in the media are typically made by men.

Community radio stations should seek creative ways to involve women, to air their views, and ensure that programmes addressing issues that concern and

interest women are aired at appropriate times of the day. Community radio can be a strong advocate for women's empowerment, by transforming their voices into policy language, involving them in managing the station, bringing down barriers and providing alternative content. Activists should capitalise on this potential. In some cases it may be appropriate to provide radio equipment for women and women's groups so that they can manage and make their own programmes.

The 'Not Just Sweet Talk' community media campaign in advance of Fiji's 2006 general elections included a radio broadcast series enabling women in local communities to identify and articulate their development priorities. It was organised by femLINKPACIFIC, and its partners. Credit: femLINKPACIFIC



Recommendations from participants

Community radio has the potential to change people's lives at the community level. It allows people to have more influence over local and regional development processes.

To make the most of progress so far, discussants felt that community radio activists need to consider the following issues:

- **Learning** Each country and region is different and everyone has different perspectives and experiences. Yet, community radio stations internationally can learn from each other. Activists need to explore opportunities for south-south networking and set up platforms where ideas and programmes can be shared, resources generated and pooled and where people can lobby for change.
- **Participation** Given that each radio station works in a specific context, commitment to participatory processes that include and engage the community is critical for any initiative to succeed.
- **Networking** Setting up partnerships between stakeholders, including other broadcasters, NGOs and Human Rights groups, and building local, regional and international networks will strengthen and provide support to new movements.
- **Evaluation** Radio stations need to include provisions in their budgets to finance evaluations and assessments. If external evaluators are used they should collaborate with local people so they retain ownership of the process.
- **Language** To facilitate networking, mechanisms such as this email discussion and other resources should be accessible in different languages, including English, Spanish and French.



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